

The Consistency Of The Maturing church (Song 7:9-13)

by BS Poh

The Lord loves the maturing church for good reasons. She is His workmanship, and she is beautiful. In Chapter 7:1-9, the beauty of the church is seen from two main angles. Firstly, the church is strong and reliable. She is strengthened by the Lord and becomes useful and reliable in His service. Secondly, she is balanced and proportionate in her spiritual growth and understanding of doctrine. She is not clumsy and awkward. Her overall beauty - of character and usefulness - is pictured as a healthy palm tree growing tall and strong, and bearing abundance of fruit. The church, of course, is a reference to God's people considered corporately. We are not referring to the place where they meet, but to the individuals who know Jesus Christ as their Saviour. Since the church is made of of such individual believers, they also partake of the characteristics of the church. Everything we have learned about the church must be applied to the individual Christian. The beauty of the church and the individual believer is shown by a pleasing consistency. Unlike the new believer who may be full of zeal in outreach but lacking in knowledge, or who knows certain doctrines well but is ignorant of the doctrinal controversies of the past and the pitfalls that he might fall into, the mature believer is well-grounded, knowledgeable and stable. He is also reliable and able to do things well. You might question the propriety of using the term "mature Christian" because a Christian is always maturing and will never arrive at true maturity, until we arrive in heaven. For our purpose here, the mature Christian is one who has matured to some degree and is still maturing.

In Chapter 7:9-13, the consistency of the mature church or believer is shown in four areas. To be consistent is to be steady and regular, and to act according to what is claimed. An inconsistent person changes his actions quickly and unpredictably. He is not reliable and hard to be trusted. The mature believer is consistent in his faith and in his spiritual life. Firstly, there is consistency in private communion with the Lord, covering verse 9-10. Secondly, there is consistency in service to the Lord, covering verse 11. Thirdly, there is consistency in self-examination before the Lord, covering verse 12. Fourthly, there is consistency in giving to the Lord, covering verse 13.

I. Consistency in private communion with the Lord (vv. 9-10)

We consider first the consistency of the mature believer in his private communion with the Lord, covering verses 9 to 10. The overall beauty of the bride has been portrayed by the fruitful palm tree in verses 6 to 9. The tall and dignified tree, with spreading branches and abundant fruit is beautiful for landscaping purposes as well as for providing food. Trees are often cultivated for their looks, for their fruits, or for their shade. The beauty of the tree has been discussed. Here, the fruitfulness of the tree is the focus of attention. The groom who owns the garden is so pleased with the tree that he climbs it to pluck the fruit. The fruit makes up the meal that he now enjoys, together with the apples of the garden and the wine made from grapes of the same garden. Everything is exquisite! Today, wine is so high in alcohol content that there is much abuse in drinking it. Here, the picture conveyed is the rightful enjoyment of the fruits harvested from the garden. This portrays the Lord's delight in the maturing church. The Lord has the right to enjoy the fruit of His labour. In Isaiah 53:11, the coming Saviour is described as follows: "He shall see the labour of His soul, *and* be satisfied. By

His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities.” Jesus Christ’s death on the cross will make atonement for the sins of His people, so that those who repent and believe in Him will be forgiven by God. His work of saving His people has been successfully accomplished, as shown by His resurrection. More and more of God’s chosen people are being called out from their lives of sin by the gospel. More and more, the church is becoming complete, while being sanctified by the word of God. The Lord takes delight in His church!

The bride responds to the the love of the groom by giving of herself freely to him. We have seen this happening before, in the earlier chapters. Here, the response of the bride has a definite quality of consistency not seen in those earlier chapters. She is now more mature. She is now more fruitful in her life, and more steady in her relationship to the groom. We are told in the second part of verse 9, “*The wine goes down* smoothly for my beloved, moving gently the lips of sleepers.” The bride willingly provides the wine, to please the palate of the groom. This speaks of the love of the church for the Lord. We love the Lord only because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). The Lord showed His love by willingly dying on the cross for us. By His perfect sacrifice for His people, their sins are atoned for. Our guilt before God is cancelled. The Lord’s righteousness is regarded as ours. God declares us no more guilty because of Christ’s death for us. We are forgiven and accepted by God because of what Jesus Christ has accomplished on the cross for His people. Do you understand how a sinner is saved? Do you know why Christ had to die on the cross? Have you come to Him in repentance and faith? Too many professing Christians claim that they love the Lord when they have not understood how they are saved. If they do not understand how they are saved, can they possibly be saved? When there is ignorance or shallowness of understanding on such basic matters, there will be no deep gratitude to the Lord for salvation. There is, therefore, hardly any consecration in those who claim themselves to be Christians.

Compared to the bride in the present passage, she behaves so differently. Verse 10 says, “*I am my beloved’s and his desire is toward me.*” She revels in the love of the groom, and she gives of herself to him. This is expected of those who understand the way of salvation and have experienced the goodness of God in Christ. The teaching of Scripture is that we are totally lost in our sins. We deserve eternal damnation from God for our sins against Him. There is no possibility of anyone saving himself. God has to show His mercy to us before we can be saved. His mercy is shown by sending His only begotten Son to this world to die as the substitute for those He intended to save. Salvation is the free gift of God to underserving sinners. If you have experienced His mercy in Jesus Christ, you will be grateful to Him and to His Son. You will want to give of yourself to the Lord. You will seek to know Him more and more through the teaching of Scripture. You will grow in usefulness in His service. You will not hold yourself back from serving the Lord willingly. Unwilling service is never acceptable to the Lord. Think of the Parable of the Talents, in Matthew 25. There are the five-talent man, the two-talent man, and the one-talent man. The man with one talent said to his master, “Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, *there you have what is yours.*” The man was rightly condemned as wicked and lazy. Think of how you would express yourself to someone you love. You would willingly seek to please him or her. You would spend much time together. You would talk to each other much. Here, we have the bride representing the mature church or believer. The mature believer would keep constant communion with his Lord. There will be regular time spent in prayer and in the reading and meditation of the word of God. He is growing in spirituality and transforming more and more to be like the Lord. There will be consistency in such private communion with the Lord in the mature believer.

II. Consistency in service to the Lord (v. 11)

Secondly, we see consistency in the church as she serves the Lord. In verse 11, we are told, “Come, my beloved, let us go forth to the field; let us lodge in the villages.” You might be wondering why

the bride should invite the groom to go forth to the field and to stay in the villages. After all, they are not married yet. How could they be behaving as though they are already married? Before your imagination takes you too far, please remember that Solomon, who is the groom, has his retinue of servants, soldiers and counsellors with him. The bride also has the daughters of Jerusalem with her - the maids-in-waiting. She is not alone. Jewish couples who were betrothed to each other would be regarded legally as husband and wife, but they would not live together until the wedding day. Furthermore, we must keep in mind the fact that this is a spiritual allegory of the Christian life. How should we understand this verse?

Note that the word “villages” is in the plural. It is used in connection with going forth to the field. The field speaks to us of the place of ministry. Today, we would refer to the mission field of any particular missionary. Our church would have a mission field to serve in, namely the country in which we are located. The bride is inviting the groom to go forth to the field, showing her keenness and enthusiasm for the groom to see where she labours. Believers who are committed to serve the Lord by carrying out the Great Commission would constantly bring the work before the Lord in prayer. They would pray for the Lord’s presence in the mission field, and for His blessing upon whatever gospel endeavours they are engaged in. The villages speak of the need to travel from one place to another, and the need to lodge overnight in these places. We are reminded of the Lord travelling from place to place to preach. We are told in Mark 6:6, “Then He went about the villages in a circuit, teaching.” The Lord also sent out His disciples two by two to preach. That entailed travelling from place to place, and the need to lodge overnight. Travel in those days was not as comfortable as today. There were no motorized vehicles, no tarred roads, and no five-star hotels to lodge in. The disciples had to put up with discomfort, and rejection by the people they went to. They had to be exposed to the elements. They were also exposed to some degrees of danger from robbers and enemies of the gospel. Down the centuries, many missionaries have had to put up with similar discomfort and dangers as they served the Lord in foreign lands.

What about us today? Do we serve the Lord with enthusiasm? Are we prepared to put up with discomfort and dangers? We know too well that many Christians today take the Lord’s work too lightly. We complain too much, and are unwilling to bear up with deprivation and hardship as we serve the Lord. Many Christians are not prepared to get out of their comfort zone. Everything must be to their own convenience before they would budge. Modern Christianity is characterized by laziness, lack of zeal and complacency. There are the exceptions, but they are rarely found. The younger believers think that older believers should take the lead before they would join in. The older believers think that they have done their share of work for the Lord, and it is now up to the younger ones to serve Him. There is a tendency to swing to extremes - either to be exclusively pious, or to be exclusively activistic. A mature believer would seek to be pious as well as being active in the Lord’s service.

The wrong conclusion often is drawn from the incident between Martha and Mary in Luke 10. Martha is portrayed as being activistic, while Mary is portrayed as pious. The Lord’s admonition of Martha is taken to be a “minus point” for her, while Mary is regarded as gaining a “plus point”. The conclusion is wrongly drawn that it is better to learn from the Lord rather than to serve Him when, in reality, the Lord was only admonishing Martha for worrying overmuch. It wasn’t a case of Martha being wrong serving everyone, and Mary being right learning from the Lord. The Lord’s actual words, in Luke 10:41-42 are, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.” The problem was that she chose the wrong time to serve, and in an unhappy spirit. She could have done it later. On the part of Mary, it wasn’t that she was not going to serve. She would serve later, but learning from the Lord took the priority at that time. What we are saying, then, is that it is not a choice between service and learning, but a matter of priority between the two. Learning from God’s word takes the priority over service to God. Both are important, but learning

from God's word must come first. If you focus only on service, you will soon run out of energy and motivation, just like a car that runs out of fuel. We often hear of Christians who seek for a church where they can serve, instead of a church where there is good teaching. We hold to a different view, believing that you must seek out a church where there is good teaching, and service will naturally follow. Those who only learn right doctrines, without a desire to serve, display a distorted type of faith. Those who focus on service while despising the importance of doctrine display a distressing ignorance of true faith. A mature believer knows the importance of learning right doctrines, followed by active service to the Lord. Spiritual maturity is shown by sustained communion with the Lord, such that there is consistency in service to the Lord.

III. Consistency in self-examination before the Lord (v. 12)

In the third area, the mature believer is consistent in self-examination before the Lord. The bride again takes the initiative to say to the groom, in verse 12, "Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine has budded, *whether* the grape blossoms are open, *and* the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love." In the old days, and in farming communities today, people woke up early to get as much work done as possible. Once the sun was high in the sky, it would be too hot to work. The principle involved is that those who work hard will reap the rewards. Today, there are still people who think negatively of you if you wake up late to work. They do not realize that times have changed, and it is possible that the nature of your job requires you to stay up till late at night to work, which means that you will wake up late the next morning. The important thing is that you need to work hard in order to see fruit from your labour. Here, the bride does not examine just one tree, but each tree in turn. She works with the purpose of seeing the plants blooming, so that fruits will be seen after that. She is not merely examining the plants, with no aim in mind. Hard work is needed to trim the plants, to remove the weeds, and to fertilize the ground, but it was done with the clear aim of seeing fruit in due time.

This is where we must ponder upon the way we work. Do we work with clear objectives in mind, or do we merely waste time doing things that are trivial, and accomplishing nothing in the end? Young people will need to take this to heart. Since you have to study to pass your examinations, why not work hard to pass well? This applies to adults as well. Most of us work to earn a living. Since we have to work, can we not do our work well and be a good witness to others? Of course, in anything that is good, right and true, there is the danger of abuse or taking things to extremes, and misapplying what we are saying. There are those who are "workaholics", who appear to be "married to their work" and neglect their families. There are those who are conscientious at work, but neglect their own spiritual welfare. In fact, it is work for the Lord that we are primarily concerned with here. We want to serve the Lord well, realizing that our spiritual life affects all other areas of life. Daily self-examination will be helpful so that we do not overlook anything that needs attention. That is why we advocate being consistent in keeping daily devotion with the Lord. You do not have to spend hours reading the Bible and praying each day. You need only fifteen minutes to read the passage for the day, and to commit the day to the Lord in prayer, before your set of for work. You need only five minutes each night to ponder on the day's work and to pray. Families must ensure there is family devotion. Apart from daily devotions, weekly self-examination is of utmost importance to the believer. Unless hindered by providence in life, or circumstances in your work, it is important that believers attend church to hear the word of God, to meditate, and to pray. We immersed ourselves so much in the world, interacting with unbelievers, and receiving input of information and values from them, knowingly and unknowingly. We spend too little time with God and His people. It is of utmost importance that we keep the Lord's day, and spend time with the Lord's people, while engaging in worship and service to the Lord. The Lord's supper should not be neglected, for it is designed for meditation and self-examination.

We note that, in verse 12, the bride invites the groom to come along as she examined the plants in the garden. Furthermore, the bride says, "There I will give you my love." It is hazardous to do work

for the Lord without seeking His presence and blessing. It is so easy for us to begin well and to quickly go astray. Often, we go astray in heart before it shows outwardly. We begin with the noble aim of doing all things to God's glory, but we quickly go astray by thinking that it is *our* work, done in *our* strength, by *our* wisdom. Soon, we forget who we are serving, so that the Lord is not with us in the work, and we are no longer doing it out of love for Him. In the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, the Lord promises to be with His people "to the end of the age". However, when we do not seek the Lord's presence in prayer, we will not find Him present with us. It is no wonder that we get unduly irritated, frustrated, and disappointed when things do not go well. It is because we are treating God's work as our work. No doubt, believers are often upset when there are problems in the church. That is because we love the Lord and our lives are so much intertwined in His work. However, there is a subtle difference between being upset because of love for the Lord and being upset because we are treating His work as *our* work.

Let us learn to do all things out of love for Him, to God's glory. Let us learn to invite the Lord into all that we do for Him. This requires constant self-examination, which must be done with the Lord's presence as well. The mature believer will be consistent in doing this.

IV. Consistency in giving to the Lord (v. 13)

We move on to the fourth, and last area, of consistency in the mature believer, which is in giving to the Lord. Verse 13 says, "The mandrakes give off a fragrance, and at our gates *are* pleasant *fruits*, all manner, new and old, which I have laid up for you, my beloved." The fruiting season has come. Some fruits need to be plucked while green, and then allowed to ripen. Jackfruits and bananas fall into this category. The mandrake is one such fruit. It is orange in colour and fragrant. It is supposed to be an aphrodisiac, containing a fertility-inducing substance. In Genesis 30, Leah and Rachel quarreled over some mandrakes. Other fruits such as grapes will need to be plucked when ripe. There are baskets of fruits, both old and new, lined up at the gates of the garden, by the bride, for the groom. How is the groom going to finish eating all these fruits? Ah, this is where you must understand! Have you not heard how the Chinese emperors encouraged the art of cooking such that Chinese cuisine is so well-known throughout the world? The cooks in those days would produce exquisite dishes of all kinds and have them laid before the emperor. The emperor only chose and tasted whichever dishes he set his eyes on. He did not even taste all the dishes, let alone eat them! He was the highest authority in the nation, and had the right to do that. Here, the baskets of fruits are laid up by the gates to welcome the groom. If you were welcomed like that, it would show that you were highly honoured. The Lord rightly deserves to be honoured by His people. We show our submission and honour to Him by bringing out the best that we have for Him. In addition to submission and honour, we show forth our love for Him. The church does not withhold anything from the Lord, for we owe our all to Him.

Consider the income that you gain from your work. The opportunity to work comes from the Lord. Your health comes from the Lord. Your life also comes from the Lord. All that you gain from your work, therefore, comes from the Lord. "The earth is the LORD's, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein (Psalm 24:1)." That is why mature believers would willingly give a tenth of what they earn to the Lord, in acknowledgement that everything comes from Him. Consider, next, the time that you have. You have time for this and that, but do you give time to the Lord? You adjust your time to suit company dinners and family functions, but do you adjust your time to hear God's word? While company dinners and family functions are often one-off events, church meetings are regular. Our life should revolve around the church, with the Lord in the centre. Then, consider the gifts or abilities that God has given to you. Are you putting them to good use for the sake of God's kingdom? Some Christians have done well and accomplished notable success in their career. Do not make the mistake of Nebuchanezzar, who claimed the credit for building up "this great Babylon", "by my mighty power and for the honour of my majesty" - he said, in Daniel 4:30. God took away his kingdom, and consigned him to live with the beasts of the field. Don't make the mistake of King

Herod, who accepted worship as a god, and was struck down by God. “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap (Gal. 6:7).” We want to give of ourselves, and all that we have, to God. Everything is placed at His disposal. We do it willingly, generously, and privately. We do not want to parade our piety before the world. The mature Christian is marked by this quiet consecration to the Lord.

This leads us to one final thought, namely, that it is not possible to consider all that we have as the Lord’s if we do not consider ourselves as belonging to the Lord. This truth is brought out well in the case of the Egyptians who came to Joseph for food. In Genesis 47:18-19, the Egyptians said to Joseph, “We will not hide from my lord that our money is gone; my lord also has our herds of livestock. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our lands. Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for bread, and we and our land will be servants of Pharaoh; give *us* seed, that we may live and not die, that the land may not be desolate.” The Egyptians knew it was useless hiding their plight from Joseph. They knew there was nothing left with which to buy grain, except their bodies and their lands. They knew that Joseph alone could help them, otherwise, they would die. They were prepared to give everything to Pharaoh in exchange for life. This is the picture of how a sinner may be saved. He must come to Jesus Christ, who alone can save sinners. Jesus Christ has procured salvation by His death on the cross. The sinner who comes to ask for eternal life from Him must willingly give of himself to God. We are told, in 1 Corinthians 6:20, “For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.” The believer no longer considers himself as his own. Rather, he considers himself as belonging to Jesus Christ. As we mature in the faith, we demonstrate this by giving of ourselves, and all that we have, to the Lord. Our money is at the Lord’s disposal. Our home is for the Lord to use. Our time, energy, and abilities are given over to serve the Lord. If you are thinking of becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ, this is the cost that you must pay - not just what you have, but your total self. This does not mean, of course, parting with all your wealth, or becoming a full-time preacher or missionary, but it does mean a giving of your all, in whatever your circumstances, to the Lord.

Conclusion

We must draw to a conclusion. We have seen that the mature church or believer is characterized by consistency in four areas, namely, in private communion with the Lord, in service to the Lord, in self-examination before the Lord, and in giving to the Lord. There are, of course, other areas of the Christian life where consistency is needed, but these four areas are sufficient to convey the main truth involved, namely, that the mature Christian loves the Lord and expresses it by a life of consistency in his walk with Him. We might summarize all that we have learned by these two words, namely, love and consistency. Firstly, there is love for the Lord. When there is true love, you will be prepared to do anything for the Lord. We do not risk our lives unnecessarily, but we are prepared to accept the risks that come with serving the Lord. In the world, calculated risks are taken - for example, in business. If worldly people are prepared to take risks for things that we regard as temporary and of limited value, why are we not prepared to take necessary risks for the Lord? Have we forgotten the sovereignty of God, or is this just a doctrine in the mind? If God is sovereign - controlling all things to the good of His people, and determining when and how we die - why should we fear so much? We fear for our lives, we fear for our reputation, and we fear disruption to the comforts of life. Everything must be to our convenience before we would do anything in service to our Lord. Is that love?

Secondly, there is consistency in our walk with the Lord. A mature Christian will be consistent in his profession of faith, in his way of life, and in his service to the Lord. Here is someone who claims that he is willing to serve the Lord as a missionary in a foreign land, if it is clearly God’s will for him. Are you really prepared to serve the Lord as a foreign missionary when you are too embarrassed to distribute tracts in the shopping mall? Are you too ashamed to be seen by your

relatives and colleagues? Think of the Lord who gave up His glory in heaven to come to earth to save a sinner like you. Think of the humiliation he went through as He hung naked on the cross in the sight of all. Think of the agony He underwent to save you. Are you ashamed of Him? Are you not prepared to be identified with Him? Are you still thinking of “saving your face” and protecting your reputation? We do not want anyone to feel pressured to come to distribute tracts together with us. What applies to tracting applies to other avenues of service. We do not want you to feel guilty for not being able to join us. We would want those who take part to do so willingly, out of a heart of love for the Lord.

We see now how love for the Lord and consistency in our walk with Him are linked together. We see also how consistency is reflected in our lives. A maturing Christian is one who is consistent, reliable, unwavering, and ready to serve the Lord. He is not haphazard and irregular. May God help us to be the consistent Christians that we ought to be.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~